Learning to Govern:
An Institutional View of the 104th Congress

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The 104th Congress was a great gift to political science. And Congress watchers like myself have been trying to make good use of it. For me, the fascination grows largely from one, simple historical fact: the 104th was the first Congress in 40 years in which the Republican party controlled the House of Representatives. Every account of the 104th Congress mentions it. But none of them makes anything of it. I want to tell a story that does make something out of it.

Certainly, there is nothing in our history to match this 40-year stretch--from 1955 to 1995--without an alternation in party control of the House. In the 100 years from 1855 to 1955, the longest previous span of one-party dominance was 16 years. The Republicans did it twice, and the Democrats did it once. Indeed, forty years is an extraordinarily long time for one-party control of any democratically elected national legislature. During the same 40 years that one party controlled our U.S. House of Representatives, for example, partisan control of the British House of Commons changed hands four times, and the least victorious party ran that institution for nearly one-quarter of the period.

Forty years of unchanging partisan dominance may be quite idiosyncratic. But it is enough of a phenomenon, I would argue, to have had some effect on the Congress that finally broke the mold--
the 104th. For students of Congress, the question is: "What effect did twenty consecutive Democratic Congresses have on the activity of the first Republican Congress that followed?"

For me, the question has been stimulated by the counterfactual hunch that had we experienced even some minimal alternation in party control during the 40 preceding years, the politics of the 104th Congress would have been different than it was. My hunch is that 40 years of one party control of the House helped produce some serious consequences, among which were the confrontational leadership behavior of Newt Gingrich, the decline in cross-party civility inside the House, the Republican-led movement for term limits in the country and the accelerated decline of public confidence in Congress as an institution. Whatever the validity of these hunches, they have reenforced my notion that 40 years without a change of party control had a major impact on the activities of the House of Representatives in the 104th Congress. And the House, let us not forget, is the institutional centerpiece of our system of representative democracy.

The argument I want to make is that 40 consecutive years as the minority party in the House left the Republicans, as of November 1994, totally without any first-hand political experience of two essential sorts--first, experience in interpreting electoral victory and, second, experience in governing the country. In both
respects, the relevant experience had been available only to the majority party Democrats. Their lack of relevant experience, together with their accumulated frustrations, I shall argue, led the new Republican majority to make serious mistakes—first, of interpretation and then, of governance. Because of their inexperience and their mistakes, the House Republicans missed their golden governing opportunity and made possible the rehabilitation, the resurgence and the reelection of Bill Clinton. And further, that the reelection of Bill Clinton placed severe constraints on what Republicans could do for themselves in the 105th Congress that followed.

To begin with, the period following an election is a critical time for every victorious political party. It is the time during which the winners decide for themselves what their victory meant, and how their victory will shape their future activity. It is for them to interpret the election results; and it is their electoral interpretation that becomes the essential link between the business of campaigning and the business of governing. Everything that follows in the new Congress will be affected by the post-election interpretation of the winners. Political scientists will, of course, decide after many years and many Ph.D. dissertations what the voters message really was. But the winning party cannot wait. It must choose its own working approximation early and will soon
face the consequences.

The Republicans of 1994 had never faced this interpretive problem before. For 20 consecutive elections, they had faced a very different problem--interpreting their defeat. And their interpretation had usually focussed inward--to a rash of blaming and bloodletting, and to the cannibalizing of their leadership. This time, by contrast, their 1994 electoral interpretation would be their guide to governing the country. And this time, their electoral interpretation was faulty.

They chose to interpret their victory as an electoral mandate to undertake wholesale change--a mandate for what they called a Republican revolution. The election, they decided, had ratified their call for a more responsive government--by way of such constitutional-level changes as term limits, a balanced budget amendment, a line item veto--and their call for a smaller government--by way of legislative-level reductions in spending for a huge array of government programs.

So long as they described their mandate in the general language of change to a smaller, more responsive government and with an open-ended timetable, they retained some necessary flexibility in implementation. But the Republicans also decided, in very concrete terms, that the electorate had given its approval to their campaign

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document, the Contract With America. That document contained a lengthy list of policy proposals and a 100-day timetable for completing House action on all of them. This more detailed electoral interpretation held that the public had voted support for a fairly specific program and for quick action to get it all underway. This refined reading of the election returns had two problems. There was scant evidence to support it. And, more important, it did not serve the party's long-term interest.

In the aftermath of the '94 election, all available evidence told us that the election had been more of a repudiation of the Democrats than an endorsement of the Republicans. Every incumbent House member, senator and governor who lost was a Democrat. Every poll, plus the larger-than-normal mid-term loss of Democratic seats, suggested an unusual degree of dissatisfaction with the Democratic President. Besides which, a large majority of voters had never heard of the Contract With America.

The voters had thrown out the Democrats and given the Republicans the opportunity to govern. But they had put the Republicans very much on trial and on a very short leash. Given their total lack of experience with Republican House majorities, the voters could hardly have done anything more than that. An accurate reading of the election results, therefore, would have been more provisional and more modest than the revolutionary, ten-point mandate
interpretation the Republicans adopted. Moreover, in strategy as well as accuracy, the Republican post-election interpretation of 1994 was faulty. If, as I think was the case, the party's most important long-run goal was to bring about a unified Republican government, the Republicans should have interpreted the election as an invitation to take some carefully selected first steps toward the accomplishment of that goal.

Since 1980, the Republican-conservative movement had held an intellectual advantage in the national policy debate over the performance of big government; and it had capitalized on that intellectual advantage to capture, for varying lengths of time, both the Presidency and the Senate. But never the House. Viewed strategically, therefore, the Republican's 1994 capture of the House was a long-awaited and necessary step toward the eventual achievement of a unified conservative government—of the sort that Margaret Thatcher enjoyed for 12 years in Great Britain. In which case, the overriding task of the Republican 104th Congress was to keep building toward the capture of the 105th Congress and, most importantly, the capture of the Presidency in 1996. To contemplate, much less proclaim, a "revolution" without having captured the Presidency was pure fantasy.

An electoral interpretation that emphasized the instrumental and incremental nature of their governing opportunity would have led
the Republicans to be cautious and selective in setting their legislative agenda. There was, in short, a huge difference between passing the Contract through the House in 100 days and governing the country. [A different electoral interpretation would have encouraged the new majority to appreciate that difference.]

It is perfectly understandable, however, why the Republicans did not see the difference and why they chose the Contract-centered electoral interpretation they did. For one thing, they had never before had to interpret an election victory. And the absence of relevant past decisions created uncertainty. For another thing, forty years out of power had left them with a short fuse and a short time horizon. They had built up a massive backlog of frustration and energy. They had waited long enough. They were anxious to seize the day and press their case as it was expressed in the Contract. Their inexperience plus their impatience—both products of 40 years in the minority—blinded them to the government-wide stakes and the long-run governing opportunities that had flowed from their electoral victory.

Which brings us to the critical majority-minority relationship in the House. What does that relationship involve? What is it like to be in the minority in the House? Political scientists who study the two parties inside the legislature have found a great deal of structure and predictability in the majority-minority relationship.
Based on the rules and practices of the House, certain recognizable and stable patterns of expectation, strategy and behavior have developed. And they, as a bundle, define the majority party-minority party relationship. Forty years of one party rule in the House produced a recognizable, institutionally supported Democratic-Republican party relationship. An equilibrium had been established--one unfavorable to the Republicans, but stable nonetheless. For forty years, House Democrats learned only how to be a majority party; and House Republicans learned only how to be a minority party.

The two key features of the majority-minority relationship are first that the majority party organizes and runs the House and second that the minority party adapts to the governing majority. When the out-going Democratic majority leader, Dick Gephardt, handed the gavel to the incoming Speaker, Newt Gingrich, on opening day January 1995, he said, "I hereby end 40 years of Democratic rule of this House." "Rule" was the correct word. All of our research tells us that for 40 years, the majority party Democrats dominated action in the House committees and on the House floor.

More than that, the Democrats acted like they would control the House as far into the future as anyone could see. And indeed, that was the commonly held expectation throughout the period--that there was no alternation in power in sight. Political science studies of
incumbency advantages, retirement ratios, the career ambitions and the strategic behavior of politicians all pointed to continued Democratic majorities. National surveys repeatedly showed that a majority of voters preferred Democrats to Republicans when voting for Congress. Twenty consecutive election defeats kept ratifying these assumptions. Many safe and talented minority party Republicans accepted this judgment and, despairing of their chances for attaining majority status, left the House.

The widely shared expectation of continued Democratic party control affected the structure of incentives inside the chamber. The idea here is that when both parties expect to alternate in power, the party temporarily in the majority has a greater incentive to consult, cooperate and compromise with the party temporarily in the minority. And a sense of reciprocity develops between the two parties. On the other hand, goes the argument, when the majority party has not experienced minority status in the past, and does not expect to be in the minority any day soon, the incentive for taking the minority into account is substantially reduced; the sense of reciprocity or comity is less likely to develop. And that is what happened during 40 years without any partisan alternation in power. Forty years of one party rule--past, present and projected--fostered a pattern of arrogance on one side and frustration on the other side of the majority-minority relationship in the House.

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If the first feature of the majority-minority relationship is that the majority governs, the second feature is that the minority adapts. From 1955 to 1995 the Republicans carried on an internal debate about the appropriate strategy of adaptation to the majority.

On one side were the institutional partisans who advocated accommodation and cooperation with the majority, who worked within the existing rules of the House to get whatever they could by way of bipartisan or cross partisan policy adjustment. On the other side were the confrontational partisans who advocated an aggressive in-your-face approach to the majority, who cared little about legislative responsibility and whose only goal was to drive the Democrats from power. In the beginning, the institutional partisans won some legislative battles and they prevailed inside the party. But the 40-year trend in the adaptation debate moved gradually—with each influx of Republican newcomers—away from a strategy of institutional partisanship and toward a strategy of confrontational partisanship.

The central theme among political scientists studying recent Congresses has been the steady increase in partisanship inside the House, "the resurgence of partisanship" in David Rohde's words. If we study this "resurgence," from the majority party's perspective, the increase in partisanship is explained by a gradually more
cohesive, more ideologically homogeneous, better organized and more decisively led Democratic party. But if we write the 40-year story from the minority party's perspective, that same increase in partisanship is explained by the gradual change in Republican adaptation strategy--as institutional partisans got replaced by confrontational partisans. The shift in that internal balance was finally completed when the leader of the confrontational partisans was elected as both the leader of his party and as Speaker of the House.

Which brings us to Newt Gingrich--the architect, the leader, the articulator and the symbol of the minority party's confrontational adaptation strategy in coping with the majority. In my story, his ideas and his activities are not personality matters. They are institutional matters. From the time he came to Congress in 1978, he thought about the House in institutional terms, that is, in terms of the majority party-minority party relationship. His overriding goal was to make the Republicans the majority party in the House. His instrumental goal was to change the party's adaptation strategy from accommodation to confrontation. "I will do almost anything to win a Republican majority in Congress," he vowed. And from 1978 to 1994, he fought that institutional battle.

He battled, first, by working to undermine two successive
Republican House leaders, because he deemed them to be insufficiently confrontational. He and his soulmates pressured first John Rhodes and then Bob Michel to be more aggressive in fighting Democrats than they wanted to be. And that pressure contributed mightily both to the premature resignation of Rhodes and the premature retirement of Michel from their position as Minority Leader.

Second, he battled by leading a sweeping attack on House Democrats. He attacked and humiliated Speaker Tip O'Neill for overstepping his bounds as presiding officer of the House. He attacked Speaker Jim Wright for using his public position to enrich himself; and, in his greatest triumph, drove Speaker Wright from the House. "I am engaged in a long-term struggle," he explained. "The House is sick and Wright is the symbol."

Third, he battled by attacking the House as an institution. When criticized for his personal attacks on Democratic leaders, he replied that his target was the institution itself. "This is about systemic, institutional corruption, not personality," he declared. And he charged that, "The Democrats have run the House for 30 years. They've gotten sloppy. The House is a corrupt institution."

In November 1994, the pursuit of this confrontational strategy
produced the Republican majority he had so single-mindedly sought. It was an incredible success story. But success carried with it some serious costs as the new majority took up its governing tasks.

First, by attacking a generation of his own party's institutional partisans, Gingrich was attacking, in effect, the established set of majority party-minority party relationships which had given definition and stability to the House as an institution for four decades. More than that, he seemed to be ruling out accommodation as an acceptable mode of cross-party behavior in the future. If so, he left it very unclear what new kind of majority-minority equilibrium he intended to put in its place. If what he wanted was less cross-party collegiality in the 104th Congress, he surely got it. "(I think) in all my years in Congress," said one twenty-four year House Democrat in 1996, "I have never seen such bitter feelings between the minority and the majority."

Second, the scope and severity of Gingrich's partisan attacks earned him, personally, an implacable legacy of ill will from the Democrats. In 1991, he admitted to being "the most hated man on Capitol Hill." When asked to explain the "polarized and embittered" House in 1995, respected Republican veteran Henry Hyde cited "the absolutely pathological hatred of Newt Gingrich" by the Democrats. Their persistent payback harassment of Speaker Gingrich continues, to this day, to inhibit cross-party cooperation.

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Finally, by couching his attacks in the language of "institutional corruption," and the personal abuse of power (that is, "in the Lord Acton sense"), Gingrich deliberately manipulated and exacerbated a widespread public cynicism and lack of confidence in the nation's most important representative institution. In attacking majority party arrogance, he was certainly on target. But it was impossible to listen or to read his yearly litany of indictments and to think well of the Congress as an institution. In working to take control of the House, he had also undermined and weakened it in the public eye.

Newt Gingrich and his confrontational style, I would argue, were the predictable results of 40 years in the minority. If it had not been him, it would have been another confrontational partisan like him. The problem was institutional, not personal. Had there been an occasional alternation in power, and had the Republicans of the 104th Congress been able to know and to reap the rewards and responsibilities of running the institution earlier, they would, I believe, have settled on a more accommodationist leadership style. The act of trading places occasionally would necessarily have introduced constraints on their partisanship. Alternation would also have produced a strong incentive to protect the existing institutional framework, placing greater emphasis on cross-party comity and reciprocity. The explanation for Newt Gingrich's rise to party leadership and for his subsequent leadership performance
depends heavily, I would argue, on the extraordinary length of time his party had had to endure the deprivations and frustrations of an out-party minority.

So, what about the governing performance of the 104th Congress? The good news was that the Republican party had been given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The bad news was that the Republican party had been given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! It was 40 years since they had been in a position to govern. They were, arguably, the least experienced House majority in 100 years. And it showed.

The party's new leader produced a torrent of rhetoric about governing. "This is a genuine revolution," said Gingrich. "We're going to rethink every element of the federal government. We're going to close down several federal departments." But he had no idea how to do any of it. He was, after all, just a smart, articulate, visionary college professor! Governing was going to be a totally experimental adventure for him.

Again, there is nothing surprising about this state of affairs. The governing expertise the Republicans lacked was precisely the kind which can only be acquired--in trial and error fashion--by those who have held power. The governing expertise of which I speak is not subject matter expertise--which minority members can acquire in their committees. It is expertise about the business of
legislating. That business involves a practical grasp of lawmaking as a lengthy, incremental, multi-level, coalition-building process. And it involves a seasoned strategic sense in matters such as the establishment of priorities, the negotiation of outcomes across the separated institutions of government and the calculations that must be made concerning feasibilities, trade offs and timing at every decision-making juncture. In short, successful governing takes a lot of practice and the Republicans hadn't had any.

When the victorious Republicans huddled after the election--under the influence of their "we-won-it-and-we-got-a-sweeping-mandate" interpretation of the election results--they decided to take the document they had crafted for electioneering purposes--the Contract With America--and adopt it wholesale as their legislative agenda. The decision had the virtue of giving instant focus, organization and work to a new, inexperienced and impatient majority. But, its conception of the governing process was every bit as faulty as the faulty electoral interpretation on which it rested.

First, because it had been packaged for electoral purposes, the Contract lacked any sense for legislative priorities. It was a laundry list of ten vote-getting proposals, each placed on the same footing as every other one by the promise that all would be brought to a vote in the House within 100 days. Yet they were a very mixed bag. Some were broadly institutional in content and impact; others
were more narrowly programmatic. They commanded varying support patterns; and their future prospects were uneven.

By prescribing an equality of effort and an identical time line for all items, the Republicans substituted inflexibility for subtlety. They deprived themselves of a chance to think about their legislative agenda in terms of trade offs, or to make distinctions between what they would like to get and what they really had to get. Indeed, when they discovered, late in the day, that the Contract left many legislative priorities untouched, they started piling lots of normal legislation directly onto their appropriations bills—a hasty improvisation that misused the appropriations process, bogged down the flow of money bills, opened up jurisdictional battles inside the party and brought embarrassing defeats on the House floor.

In the second place, the Contract conveyed no sense of a long run strategy for actually enacting any of its proposals into law. It focussed only on action inside the House. It took no account of the broader legislative context which lay beyond, a context of separated institutions, sharing responsibility and power. It took no cognizance of the Senate with its distinctive procedures and its different ideological make-up, nor did it comprehend the President with his veto power and his bully pulpit. This neglect of the larger context helped blind them to certain structural limitations.
on their power--for example, their very slim working majority of 14 votes--a majority that would become vulnerable under external pressure and was not even close to being veto-proof.

To be sure, the party did bring all ten Contract items to a vote in the House and they did pass nine of them there. They displayed an extraordinary diligence and discipline in doing so. When it was over, however, they talked and acted as if they had mastered the legislative process. Not only had they not understood the difference between passing the Contract and governing the country, but what was worse, they had mistaken one for the other! They took the view that they had passed the key performance test and were now ready for public judgment. "We did what we said we would do," they said. And they tirelessly repeated their slogan, "promises made, promises kept." It conveyed a far broader sense of accomplishment than was warranted.

Their performance on the Contract had, in fact, been a short-run, narrowly-focussed, inward-looking legislative performance. It had been, at best, a preliminary test of their governing ability--at the beginning of a lengthy, more complicated and longer lasting legislative effort.

It is not possible to understand the interpretive and the governing failures of the new majority party in the 104th Congress without
paying attention to the freshmen class that made the majority possible. The seventy-three newcomers are important because they enjoyed an unusually large potential for intraparty influence, and because if inexperience was to be a problem for the new majority, the freshman class would make that problem worse.

Sixty-five of the seventy-three newcomers--90 percent of them--came from constituencies that had been represented by Democrats in the 103rd Congress. Students of the linkage between elections and public policy have found that these switched-seat newcomers, fresh from a victory over the opposing party, are the most potent carriers of new policy ideas. Historically, when there is an extra large influx of switched-seat newcomers into the majority party in Congress, major policy changes follow.

The freshmen thought of themselves as a collective force. "[I am] not meaningful," said one member, "but the word `freshman' is meaningful." They spoke of themselves regularly as "the freshman class."

The freshman class is the best representation of an absolute commitment to change.

The freshman class is prepared to go to the wall for what we believe in.

Self-consciously and self-confidently they thought of themselves as

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a force to be reckoned with in the 104th Congress. As one of them said to me, "The freshman class is a real thing."

As a group, therefore, the freshmen were long on size and cohesion. They were also long on conviction and confidence. But they were short on another major attribute of legislative influence—experience. Less than half of the freshmen (35) had previous electoral experience. Of that group, only seventeen had any experience in a state legislature; and of that group, just seven had any experience as a member of the majority party in a state legislature. All told, therefore, only seven of the 73 Republican newcomers had any governing experience as a member of a legislative majority—which was, of course, the situation that faced them in the 104th Congress. In an inexperienced majority party, they were the least experienced of all.

They did not, however, think their lack of governing experience diminished their potential for influence. Far from it. They thought of themselves as "citizen legislators," for whom it was precisely their non-political experience that would be their most important contribution to the business of governing. Because they were coming from the non-political, work-a-day world, they saw themselves as bringing the real life experiences of ordinary people to bear on the work of an insulated Congress. They associated lengthy governing experience with a corrupting, self-aggrandizing
careerism that produced professional politicians, who were out of touch with every day reality. Central to their self-image was their devotion to term limits. And that special Republican devotion, I believe, was yet another product of their 40 long years as the minority party in the House.

As term-limited citizen legislators, they were prepared to get their legislative experience on the job. But because they had short-run career horizons, they were not prepared to wait to get their experience before they tried to make a difference. Their newcomer's enthusiasm, coupled with their short-run career horizons, fueled an attitude of "let's get it all, and get it all now." As one of them put it, "The freshmen class is not a do nothing class. This is a do-something-and-do-it-all-right-now-freshmen class."

They quickly seized upon the Contract With America as the authentic expression of their electoral mandate. Most signed it; most kept it in their pockets. And they became the proprietary guardians of the Contract. As each important item passed, they basked in media attention. Wearing buttons that read "Keeping Promises," and amid signs proclaiming "promises made, promises kept," they celebrated ceremoniously, by putting check marks in the appropriate boxes on wall-sized charts and in their personal copies. When it was completed, they held a grand celebratory reprise on the Capitol steps.
The passage in the House, of all but one Contract item in 100 days, was, indeed, a remarkable achievement, one worth celebrating—with one cheer, but not three. Its highly acclaimed workload statistics—time in session, pages of debate, measures reported, number of roll calls—reflected the ability to organize majority party power inside the House. But that achievement rested on a mistaken electoral interpretation, and a mistaken understanding of the overall governing process in the American political system. To the degree, therefore, that the freshmen class enshrined and enforced the Contract With America—and they surely did—their attachment to it introduced a big dose of rigidity into the legislative process, helping, thereby, to set the party on a governing path that would be difficult to change.

The organization of majority party power inside the House was the one thing Newt Gingrich had been planning for, well in advance of the '94 election. His goal was to further centralize power. And his plans centered on the increased subordination of committee power to the power of majority party leadership. But the underlying institutional condition that made party centralization easy was this: that the party had been out of power for 40 years. As his predecessor, Speaker Tom Foley, explained,

I don't think any Democratic Speaker would be in quite the same situation as Speaker Gingrich... There have been no Republican committee chairmen for over 40 years... So he's had a blank slate on which to write and that has given him a great

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deal of influence.

Seizing this opportunity, the new Speaker abolished some committees and subcommittees, appointed the committee chairmen, extracted loyalty pledges from committee leaders, controlled committee staff, selected committee members, created and staffed ad hoc task forces to circumvent committees, established committee priorities and time lines, and monitored committee compliance. The end product was an American version of a prime minister in a system of party government.

He carried out these changes with the approval of the Republican caucus; but he did it with such efficient dispatch—in concert with a small advisory group—that there were few opportunities for dissent. The freshman class was particularly predisposed to follow his lead. Ideologically, they considered themselves his children—and, politically, his beneficiaries. The conservatism they brought to the party increased the homogeneity of preferences within the party that analysts of "conditional party government" associate with an increased willingness to cede power to party leaders.

As the Speaker quickly learned, however, governing with the freshmen would be a dicey enterprise. With a slim 14 vote partisan margin, he needed all of them. A dozen or so recalcitrant freshmen (or any others) meant big trouble. Most of the time they were his allies.

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Freshmen support for the leadership on roll call votes outpaced that of the rest of the Republicans. Still, the relationship was one of mutual dependence, requiring fairly constant monitoring and bargaining--especially on amendments. As one freshman described the relationship: "On some issues, we run him and on other issues, he runs us. Of all the groups he had to deal with in the majority, the freshmen were the biggest and most consequential. The complexity and the uncertainty of their bargaining relationship became amply evident during the party's single most important legislative initiative—the budget.

Passing the Contract was not synonymous with governing the country; but passing the balanced budget was. It contained, in dollars and cents language, the sum and substance of their smaller government conservatism. It was a test that finally forced the House Republicans to contemplate the separation of powers and to cope with the conflicting budgetary views, interests and strategies of other legislative players--especially the President of the United States.

If my argument is correct, they were woefully ill-equipped for that encounter. Both their early post-election assumption that the voters had called for a "push hard and get it all now" mission, and their later post-Contract assumption that they knew how to work the legislative process, ran contrary to the evidence. Both assumptions reflected the inexperience--and the frustration--of a party that had
never been in a position to govern. And both had already led to ill-advised strategies. Nonetheless, in the mistaken belief that they commanded both public support for their revolution and the capacity to make the revolution happen, the Republicans decided to force the President to accept their budgetary blueprint in its entirety—even if it meant shutting down the federal government.

This posture, confident and militant, was the external manifestation of Newt Gingrich's career-long adaptation strategy of confrontational partisanship. And it reflected the same uncompromising spirit.

Very early in constructing a balanced budget bill, he set a tone of inflexibility by formally binding his leadership group, by vote, to a seven year timetable that would be "etched in stone." When the government first closed for lack of money, he defined the moment in portentous terms. "If we cave," he said, "it'll be clear to this country that the best chance we've had in a generation to balance the budget will have failed--not postponed--failed." He had no doubt that the President would "cave," and would accept the terms of the Republican balanced budget. The public, he believed, stood behind their presumed electoral mandate. "They are counting on us keeping our word," he said, "because they actually believe we are different."

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When the President refused to sign a continuing resolution to keep money flowing to the departments and agencies--because he would not accept a wholly extraneous and ineptly conceived rider affecting Medicare--a large part of the government closed. Gingrich predicted, without consternation, that the shutdown could "easily last 90 days." And, typically, he portrayed the budget dispute in all-or-nothing, apocalyptic terms. "It will decide for a generation who we are. This is not a game of political chicken... This is a serious, historic debate and a serious historic power struggle."

When public opinion registered on the shutdown, however, their disapproval of Republican congressional behavior stood at a whopping 71%.

Even so, after a brief reopening, the Republicans--confident that "Clinton would do what he always had done, cave and cut a deal"--once again shut off the money and shut down the government. For three weeks, off and on, legislative-executive negotiations continued. Finally, under pressure from the Senate, from some Republican House members and, ultimately, from the public, the Republicans backed down, abandoned their goal of a balanced budget and negotiated with the President to fund the government. Gingrich admitted to the President's negotiator, Leon Panetta, "Our strategy has not worked. We thought we could break you... We've got a failed strategy on our hands."

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Their unsuccessful budget confrontation with the President demonstrated, beyond any doubt, how little the new majority knew about the legislative process—about its inevitable incrementalism, its trade offs, its compromises, its negotiations and its public resonances. For one thing, budget politics is always incremental politics. It is never apocalyptic politics. You can't possibly run a revolution through the budget process. But you can use incremental budgetary changes to demonstrate that you have taken some steps to change the direction of government, and, therefore, the terms of public debate. You can then declare victory on that account—and take an overall record of forward motion to the electorate.

With the slightest bit of strategic sense, they could have done this by declaring victory at several junctures during the budget negotiations. Indeed, numerous observers claimed victory on their behalf. They pointed out the concessions made by the President; and they recorded the small but widespread reductions being made in discretionary expenditures. They credited the Republicans with a substantial "conservative correction," if not a revolution. When the President made obvious budgetary concessions, however, it was the White House that commanded the interpretative spin. Despite their incremental victories, therefore, the Republicans did not know when to declare victory and they lost their best opportunity to keep control of the public dialogue.

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By contrast, Senate leader Bob Dole—who had experienced majority party power and leadership from 1981-1986—advocated just such a series of small steps and small claims. For him, legislation should always viewed as work in progress. "You get something this year," he advised, "and you get more next year." And he insistently pressed his House counterparts with the question, "What's your end game?" But, as the President's budget negotiator knew, Gingrich had given no thought to what, in the end, he might settle for or what, in the end, he could deliver. Said Leon Panetta, "he came to the table not to negotiate, but to dictate the terms of surrender."

From the beginning, theRepublicans' electoral interpretation—the Contract, "promises made, promises kept"—set governing expectations that effectively ruled out incrementalist and gradualist governing claims of success.

The Contract With America was especially unhelpful as it shaped the budgetary behavior of the freshmen class. At the time of the budget confrontation, their experience with the Contract was the only governing experience they had known. It left them, after 100 days of success, with a heady, but false sense of their power and a false sense of their accomplishment. They came to the budget conflict with an exaggerated idea of their capacity to shape outcomes, with an unrealistic idea of how much they could win through a refusal to compromise, and with an underdeveloped idea of what the business of
governing looked like in the world beyond the House.

The newcomers styled themselves as "the conscience of the congressional Republicans," and, as such, they injected inflexibility into the budget making process. Listen, for example, to three of the ringleaders describe their view of the impending conflict: "We're not going to give in. If there has to be a train wreck, there will be a train wreck." "We're going to stand for principle. The consequences be damned." "Maybe not all 73, but 50 to 55 of us don't care if we're reelected if we fold on the balanced budget." In legislative politics, it is far easier to block than to build. And the freshmen were better at blocking than building majorities.

At the climactic moment, it was the intransigence of the freshmen vanguard that forced the Speaker to admit to executive branch negotiators that he could not deliver on any agreement the two sides might reach. And it was the same freshmen who later forced him to put his Speakership to a vote in the Caucus before they finally agreed to his proposal to reopen the government. In effect, they turned against him the very same aggressiveness they had imbibed from him. In the end, the freshmen bore a heavy responsibility for the government shutdown and for the long-run repercussions that followed.

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In the immediate sense, the cost to the Republicans was their failure to win a balanced budget agreement in the 104th Congress. In the long run, however, they failed because they did something few people thought could be done when they took over the Congress—they reelected President Bill Clinton to a second term.

When the budget process got underway, the President was adrift in the post-election doldrums—personally dispirited, politically down in the polls, on the losing side of the public debate, leader of a disorganized party, and widely thought to be a lame duck. The post-election disclosures of the money-raising frenzy that gripped the President and the White House in early 1995 were vivid reminders of how desperate they all were. By the time his budget confrontation with the Republicans had run its course, however, he had been recharged with energy, he had reached his highest ever level in the polls, he had taken command of the political center, reshaped the public dialogue, revived the hopes of his party and had become a heavy favorite for reelection. The scope of that political transformation is mind boggling and virtually impossible to pull off. But the Republicans had done it.

In his "near-death condition," the President had needed some outside event to give him an opportunity to reassert himself. Republican all-or-nothing intransigence gave him that opportunity. And he took it. He vetoed some continuing resolutions; he picked popular budget

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priorities and threatened to veto any budget that compromised them; he spoke repeatedly of the need for "common ground"; he blamed the Republicans for the misery of the shutdown. And in the process, he discovered a political label more politically punishing even than the label "liberal." That label was "extremist." By April, his approval rating stood at 56%, 21 points higher than that of the Congress.

At the Democratic convention, Al Gore brought the faithful to their feet, roaring when he said,

They passed this reckless plan and they demanded that President Clinton sign it. They shut the government down--twice, because they thought Bill Clinton would buckle under the pressure, wither in the face of attacks, cave in to their demands... (But) President Clinton took Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senator Bob Dole into the oval office. I was there, I remember. And he said, "As long as I occupy this office, you will never enact this plan because as long as I am President, I will not let you.'

The Republicans had helped him find a presidential voice. And that voice would keep him in office.

After the election, Bob Dole's communications director acknowledged that "except for a few days of euphoria following the Republican convention, nothing ever changed from the day the Republicans closed down the government." And as the President himself put it after his reelection, "The budget fight was a turning point." For the

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Republicans, the shutdown strategy was a certifiable catastrophe. Their long term goal of a unified conservative government—a Republican Congress and a Republican President—had been pushed further away than it had been two years before. That failure, I would argue, can be traced back—in considerable part—to their 40 years in the minority and out of power in the House.

Speaker Gingrich's own postmortem confession illuminates the problem nicely. "I feel like a good Triple A player," he said, "who can't hit major league pitching." His confrontational strategy was admirably suited to running an insurgency and leading the Republicans out of the political wilderness. But in the 104th Congress, neither he nor his fellow partisans had a good grasp of what to do next—how to interpret their victory or how to govern the country.

If that is a story of the 104th Congress, what can we say, quickly, about the 105th. Since the Republicans retained their control of the House in 1996, we might ask anew about their governing strategy and the slope of their learning curve. To date, the signals are mixed. There is evidence of party-wide learning. And there is evidence that they have much yet to learn.

At the end of the 104th, pressured by their upcoming reelection needs, House Republicans agreed to compromise with the President on
issues such as welfare reform and minimum wage. Election analysts subsequently credited their conversion to compromise to the party's narrow victory at the polls. It was a status quo election in which no mandate was sought and none was claimed. Afterwards, the leaders spoke of adopting an "incremental" agenda; and in that spirit, they negotiated a landmark balanced budget with the President. Speaker Gingrich gave up on his centralized, prime minister model of party leadership, in favor of increased decentralization. He broadened his top leadership group, cut back task forces and restored a considerable amount of autonomy and agenda power to the committee chairmen. So they were learning.

On the other hand, they were not. In the late spring, on the bill to aid midwest flood victims, they walked step-by-carbon-copy-step into the exact same intransigent confrontation with the President and his veto as they had on the budget and with the exact same abject capitulation and public relations disaster. Said one leadership ally, "It was a shock to me when the President vetoed the bill and we had no strategy." Deja vu all over again. Throughout the summer, their inexperience was put on public display by the abortive comic opera attempt to oust Speaker Gingrich smack in the middle of the session. The plotters, it turned out, had no idea who they might put in his place. So the gang that couldn't shoot straight was shooting blanks—not the mark of a majority party in control of the House. In the fall, thirty-five percent of Americans
still described them as "too extreme." More broadly, the party's governing performance in the 105th Congress has been hampered by an outbreak of internal divisiveness—reflecting the true heterogeneity of the party—a condition that had been muted during the initial period of extreme party centralization. In November, Gingrich described them as "a dysfunctional family."

Above all, perhaps, the 105th Congress has been a daily reminder of how much the new majority party lost when they failed at the very beginning to give top most priority to winning the Presidency. From the day they gave the President his voice in the budget confrontation, he has held the policy initiative and set the policy agenda for the country. And he has done it by occupying the political center and, from that position, preempting nearly every promising Republican idea. From his 1977 preemption that "the day of big government is over," to his 1998 preemption, "save social security first," to his daily announcement of small policy initiatives "the Great Preemptor" (Broder) has kept the Republicans on the defensive. As a Gingrich aide described them after the balanced budget was passed, "We're like the dog that caught the bus. What do we do with the balanced budget now that we've caught it..."

As we speak, the Republicans remain in internal disarray over the answer. Mostly, they seem now to be content not to govern at all, but to ride the good economy and the tide of public satisfaction to victory in the fall. How or whether they will or can govern, if
they win—or move themselves closer to their goal of a unified conservative government—is anyone's guess. And my analytical judgment is the same as the one with which I began—that forty years in the minority was far too large a governing handicap for the Republicans to overcome in one term or two.

If I may end on a normative note, my reaction to the 1994 election was that it was the best thing that could have happened to the country in terms of the health of a representative system of government—that the injection of new policy ideas and the rotation of responsibility would improve the workings of what is, after all, our most representative political institution. In retrospect, I underestimated Republican ineptitude and overestimated the likelihood that the early result would be beneficial.

One of the potential benefits from an alternation in party policy and party accountability in our most representative political institution is the opportunity it brings to refresh, enliven, and enhance our civic culture. The orderly, peaceful transfer of political power by free elections is, after all, the essential test of a functioning democracy. But the transfer of 1994 brought us very little civic renewal. Instead, we got an acceleration of partisan confrontation inside the institution and an acceleration of public distrust of Congress outside the institution. This outcome, too, I would argue, was in large measure due to the extreme

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length of time between changes in party control. In short, forty years of one-party rule was detrimental to our civic culture.

So, 40 years out of power has been a problem for Republicans; but 40 years without an alternation in power is a problem for the country, as well. And we probably ought to think about the second problem as well as the first one.

1. Media performance—complaints from freshmen—not the problem.
2. Public opinion on Congress now high! Economy.
3. Tests of learning
   1. Attitude toward Contract - finest hour?
   2. Stability for leadership.
   3. Purchase over agenda - aggressiveness, not reaction.
4. Any gain in civic culture depends on Republicans ability to govern.

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